

RELATIONAL RESILIENCE THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING IN WARTIME UKRAINE: SUPERVISORY REFLECTIONS FROM THE SERVU PROJECT

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Abstract

This paper examines the ServU project, Service-Learning (SL) in Higher Education for Ukraine's Recovery, through the lens of relational resilience. Focusing on two pilot courses, Communities of Memory at Ukrainian Catholic University and Child Mental Health Support at Sumy State University, it explores how SL can support wartime and postwar recovery by linking academic learning with community-defined needs. The analysis shows that resilience in higher education emerges not merely through institutional continuity, but through reciprocal relationships among students, teachers, communities, and international partners. The paper argues that SL act as a pedagogy of recovery grounded in reciprocity and civic responsibility.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine has profoundly affected the country's higher education system, forcing universities to operate under conditions marked by insecurity, displacement, infrastructural damage, and

widespread psychosocial distress (UNESCO, 2026). In this context, resilience cannot be reduced to the mere continuation of teaching activities. A more adequate interpretation is that resilience concerns the capacity of universities to reorganize their educational mission around urgent social realities while preserving academic quality, ethical responsibility, and civic relevance (Błaszczuk et al., 2025). The ServU materials consistently suggest that wartime service-learning (SL) should be understood in precisely these terms: not simply as continuity under pressure, but as a structured effort to reconnect higher education with communities experiencing loss, rupture, and recovery (Culcasi et al., 2024).

This paper develops that perspective by reading the ServU experience through the concept of relational resilience. In its broadest sense, relational resilience refers to the capacity of human systems to withstand disruption, reorganize under stress, and emerge with renewed resources through processes grounded in connection, communication, and shared meaning (Jordan, 2004). Applied to wartime higher education, this concept makes it possible to understand resilience not only as an institutional characteristic, but as a relational accomplishment produced across boundaries between universities, students, teachers, communities, and international partners. In other words, universities remain resilient not simply because they keep their internal structures functioning, but because they sustain and renew ties capable of carrying knowledge, care, responsibility, and public purpose in situations of uncertainty.

Within the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education project SL in Higher Education for Ukraine's Recovery (ServU), this understanding is especially productive. The project was explicitly designed to strengthen synergies between Ukrainian higher education institutions and local territorial communities through SL. Across the available materials, ServU emerged as an initiative that aimed to transform disruption into pedagogical structure: local needs were assessed, faculty were trained, courses were co-designed with European partners, and pilot activities were implemented in direct relationship with communities.

From a LUMSA supervisory perspective, the most significant contribution of these pilots was not simply that they allowed educational activity to continue, but that they created reciprocal relationships in which service and learning remained mutually shaping. This paper focuses on two emblematic cases: UCU's Communities of Memory and SumDU's Child Mental Health Support. Although they respond to different domains of recovery, one centred on cultural memory and the other on psychosocial support, both show that resilience in wartime higher education is relational before it is procedural.

Approach and methodology

The analysis presented here is based on an interpretive reading of the project materials and course documents developed within the ServU project. More specifically, it draws on the uploaded draft texts prepared for the ServU conferences, the short paper and abstract drafts, the UCU syllabus for scientific and psychoeducational practice, and the Child Mental Health Support course document prepared for SumDU. These materials make it possible to reconstruct not only the thematic focus of the two selected pilots, but also the broader pedagogical architecture within which they were developed (Culcasi et al., 2024; Hoth de Olano et al., 2024).

Under the ServU project, the participating universities followed a multi-stage process. The first stage consisted of needs assessment and community engagement. Local priorities were identified through focus groups and consultation with community representatives, public authorities, and other local stakeholders. These processes highlighted a broad range of concerns, including cultural preservation, psychosocial support, digital literacy, civic participation, and local economic recovery. This grounding in community-defined needs is crucial, because it shows that the pilot courses did not originate only from disciplinary interests or institutional agendas; rather, they were shaped by an effort to listen to communities affected by war and to translate their concerns into educational action (Hoth de Olano et al., 2024).

A second stage involved training and co-design. Ukrainian educators collaborated with European partners, including KU Leuven, Università LUMSA, and Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, in teaching tandems that supported the co-design of SL courses. This part of the process is analytically important because it demonstrates that wartime resilience was not left to individual improvisation. Instead, it was institutionalized through guidelines, toolkits, pedagogical exchange, and structured reflection. In this setting, LUMSA's contribution can be understood as methodological accompaniment: supporting course development, helping preserve the balance between service and learning, and encouraging forms of critical reflection capable of sustaining reciprocity rather than reducing community engagement to unidirectional assistance (Visser et al., 2026).

The third stage concerned pilot implementation. Six SL courses were developed and piloted from September 2025 across the Ukrainian partner universities. The two cases considered in this paper were supported through a supervisory lens that emphasized methodological rigour, reflective practice, and the ethical quality of collaboration. Finally, the fourth stage involved reflection and dissemination. Students and faculty participated in reflection seminars and shared course outcomes through public events and project materials, which contributed to the broader ServU guidelines and toolkit. This combination of needs assessment, co-design, implementation, reflection, and dissemination provides the methodological basis for the present analysis. Rather than measuring standardized impact across all pilots, the paper examines how two SL courses operationalized relational resilience and what lessons they offer for higher education in crisis contexts from the perspective of our international relation with the two universities that we had the pleasure to work with.

Case study 1: Communities of Memory at UCU

The first case concerns Communities of Memory, a course that offers a compelling example of how SL can contribute to recovery through cultural and narrative co-production. The course

engaged students with the community of Kozova in the Ternopil region, a locality seeking to preserve local knowledge and create meaningful public cultural spaces amid war, displacement, and social rupture. In this context, memory was not treated as a passive archive of the past, but as a living and contested social practice shaped by silence, responsibility, vulnerability, and the need for public recognition.

The pedagogical structure of the course is significant. Students were involved in oral history interviews, ethnographic observation, memory walks, participatory mapping, and curatorial work, eventually contributing to co-created outputs such as exhibitions, memory maps, and digital archives. This organization matters because it placed students in a relationship of reciprocity with the community. They did not simply collect stories as detached observers, nor did they enter the field as volunteers delivering a predefined service. Rather, they participated in a shared process through which community actors contributed to defining what counted as meaningful memory work, which narratives deserved visibility, and how these narratives should be represented publicly. In this way, the university became part of a collaborative ecology of remembrance and cultural recovery.

From a learning perspective, the course developed a range of competences that extended well beyond technical research skills. Students learned to conduct oral history work, interpret marginalized narratives, communicate across generations, and engage in ethical listening. They also developed reflexive awareness of their own positionality in relation to memory, loss, and representation. This reflexive dimension is particularly important in wartime conditions, where work with memory can involve emotional complexity, political sensitivity, and moral responsibility. The supervisory role was therefore essential not simply in methodological terms, but also in helping students navigate the ethical and affective demands of collaborative memory work.

The course also generated meaningful community-facing outcomes. The co-production of public memory artefacts supported the preservation and articulation of local identity

and encouraged intergenerational dialogue. More broadly, it suggested that democratic recovery is not only a matter of rebuilding infrastructure, but also of creating spaces in which lived experience can be narrated, shared, and publicly recognized. From the standpoint of relational resilience, Communities of Memory shows that universities can become resilient when they sustain forms of partnership grounded in listening, reciprocity, and shared authorship. Here resilience is enacted through cultural co-production and public dialogue, not merely through the maintenance of academic routine.

Case study 2: Child Mental Health Support at SumDU

The second case, Child Mental Health Support, addresses a different but equally urgent domain of wartime recovery: psychosocial support for children and adolescents living with war, displacement, poverty, loss, and prolonged uncertainty. The course was explicitly designed to prepare students to identify signs of emotional and behavioural distress and to provide basic psychosocial support in community settings. Its stated aim was to combine theoretical preparation with practical engagement, thereby translating academic knowledge into accessible and low-threshold forms of care.

The course document outlines a five-module structure covering foundations of child mental health, early detection of emotional disorders, effective communication with children and adolescents, interactive practices for stress reduction, and community practice with supervision. The learning outcomes are notable because they combine clinical sensitivity with community responsiveness. Students were expected to recognize signs of distress across age groups, communicate empathetically with children and caregivers, apply play-based and creative methods, identify mental health concerns in adolescence, and critically evaluate their own role as facilitators. This balance between competence and reflexivity is central to SL in crisis contexts, where educational value depends not only on knowledge acquisition, but also on students' capacity to act responsibly in situations of vulnerability.

The pedagogical methods used in the course reinforce this orientation. Interactive lectures, case-based learning, role play, workshops, and guided supervision were combined with community-based practice. The practical component included anti-stress games, storytelling, sensory exercises, art-based activities, “emotion circles,” “musical stories,” and the creation of “anti-stress boxes” for younger children. For adolescents, the course introduced group discussions, emotion mapping, reflective exercises on stress and coping, and Psychological First Aid-oriented activities designed to strengthen peer support and encourage help-seeking. These tools are important not simply as techniques, but as relational devices: they help create safe spaces, reduce anxiety, foster trust, and open channels of communication in settings where distress may otherwise remain invisible or unspoken.

Another crucial feature of the course is its embeddedness in local support ecologies. The implementation involved collaboration with schools and school psychologists, ensuring that student action was anchored within existing community structures rather than operating as an isolated intervention. This collaboration strengthened the relevance and ethical grounding of the activities, while also contributing to broader mental health literacy among educators, parents, and local stakeholders. The expected impact described in the course materials includes strengthened child mental health support within communities, greater awareness among parents and educators, and the development of students’ practical and soft skills. These outcomes align closely with the logic of relational resilience: resilience here depends on the capacity to build trustful and responsive relationships through which professional knowledge becomes socially meaningful and practically useful.

Analysis and discussion

Taken together, the two cases show that wartime SL is strongest when it creates horizontal rather than hierarchical partnerships (Culcasi and Fontana, 2023). In both examples, communities were

not positioned as passive recipients of university expertise. In Kozova, community actors shaped the direction and meaning of memory work. In Sumy, community actors, educators, psychologists, children, and caregivers influenced the format and ethical limits of psychosocial support activities. In both settings, knowledge emerged through reciprocity, co-production, and shared responsibility. This is why relational resilience is a more precise interpretive concept than institutional endurance alone.

Several broader insights emerge from the comparison. First, the cases show a movement from continuity to reciprocity. University resilience was not limited to keeping courses running; it consisted in reorganizing academic activity around relationships that could hold together learning, service, and community relevance. Second, the pilots demonstrate the value of interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral engagement. Communities of Memory connected heritage, ethnography, and civic education, while Child Mental Health Support brought together psychology, education, and community care. Third, the two cases reveal that wartime recovery must be understood in multidimensional terms. Recovery is not only infrastructural. It also involves cultural memory, psychosocial care, democratic participation, and the rebuilding of trust (Hoth de Olano et al., 2024).

A further point concerns the role of structured supervision and reflection. The materials consistently suggest that reciprocity is not automatic. It must be supported through pedagogical design, critical reflection, and attention to the ethical dimensions of collaboration (Mufron & Vann, 2025). From this point of view, LUMSA's contribution – as well the contribution offered by KU Leuven and Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt – is best understood as methodological accompaniment: helping translate local needs into academically meaningful pedagogies, preserving the mutuality of service and learning, and supporting reflective processes capable of sustaining the ethical quality of engagement. Such accompaniment is especially relevant if SLg is to move beyond isolated pilots and become institutionalized as a durable contribution to recovery.

At the same time, the evidence should be interpreted carefully. The available materials are strong in documenting partnership-building, course design, and illustrative community-facing outcomes, but they do not yet provide a single standardized dataset enabling direct impact comparison across all pilots. For this reason, it would be too strong to claim equivalent measurable outcomes for every course. A more rigorous conclusion is that the consortium demonstrated substantial adaptive and networked capacity, with particularly well-documented cases showing how universities transformed wartime conditions into structured, reciprocal, and socially meaningful relationships.

Implications for policy and institutionalization

The two cases also speak to the institutional conditions that make resilient SLg possible. If universities intend to use SL as a contribution to wartime and postwar recovery, they need to protect time for supervision, recognize community partners as co-educators, and integrate structured reflection into curricular design. Evaluation should not be based only on outputs such as the number of activities delivered or products created, but also on the quality of collaboration, the degree of civic learning achieved, and the continuity of partnerships over time. This is especially relevant in recovery settings, where fragile trust is itself a public good. Under these conditions, universities can model democratic and participatory forms of reconstruction rather than reproducing paternalistic or extractive relationships.

The ServU experience also indicates that recovery-oriented higher education should not separate educational innovation from social responsibility. The diversity of the pilot portfolio, ranging from cultural memory to psychosocial care and from entrepreneurship to territorial resilience, suggests that SL can operate as a flexible framework able to connect disciplinary knowledge with local realities without collapsing academic learning into generic volunteering. For European partners, this has implications as well: international cooperation is most valuable when it strengthens local capacities, supports context-sensitive

pedagogy, and enables methodological dialogue rather than one-way transfer. In this sense, EU–Ukraine cooperation becomes part of the resilience process itself, because it helps sustain networks through which educational action can remain intellectually grounded and socially relevant even under extreme conditions.

Conclusion

The ServU experience suggests that university resilience in wartime Ukraine was realized less as institutional persistence alone than as the creation of reciprocal infrastructures linking students, teachers, communities, and international partners. Through Communities of Memory and Child Mental Health Support, higher education became capable of contributing simultaneously to learning, civic engagement, cultural repair, and psychosocial support. These cases show that SL can function as a powerful pedagogy of recovery when it is grounded in community-defined needs, critical reflection, and horizontal partnership.

From a LUMSA supervisory perspective, the most important lesson is that SL contributes to wartime and postwar recovery not only because it mobilizes action, but because it creates relationships capable of carrying knowledge, care, responsibility, and public meaning across institutional and community boundaries. In this sense, resilience is relational before it is procedural. It is produced when universities do not withdraw into self-preservation, but remain able to act with communities in ways that are academically rigorous, ethically attentive, and socially transformative.

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